

Sonnet XXII

Glossary

soul	a human's spirit or consciousness
nigh & nigher	near and nearer
mounting	rising, escalating
aspire	seek to attain, hope or wish
orb	a sphere
contrarious	uncooperative, wilfully disobedient
recoil	to move back suddenly
death-hour	judgement day, time of death

Summary

Once more the speaker addresses the lover in this sonnet. She speaks of their eternal love and imagines a time in the future when they ascend to heaven. However, she presents the perfection of the angels and their gifts as interruptions to the serenity of their love. Instead she actually implores they stay on Earth so they are undisturbed. It seems their love is so pure that mortal men stay away from them and leave them to enjoy their own company.

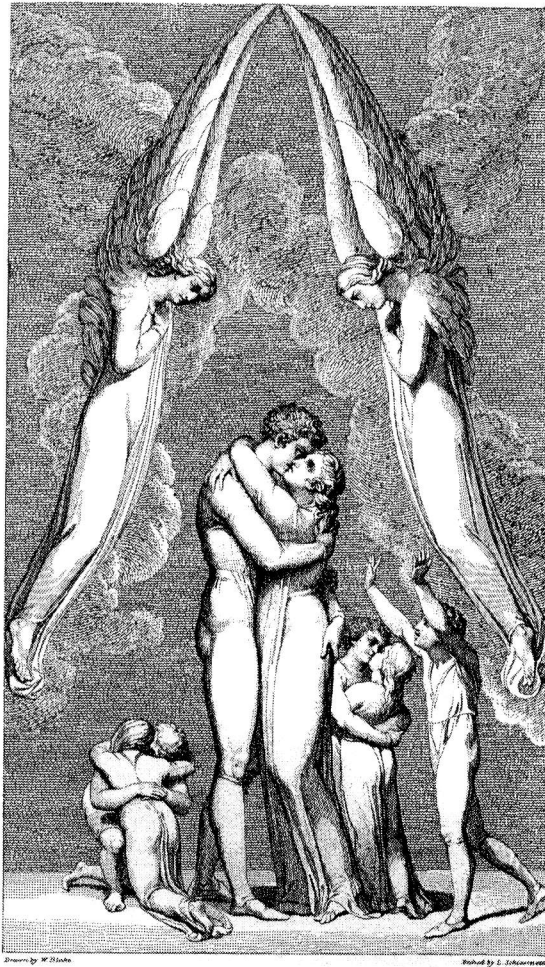
Discussion

The poem begins with a discussion of an inevitable time – “When our two souls stand up erect and strong...” It is the time of their movement into heaven. It is significant that Barrett Browning does not see that earthly death will separate them. Their love is presented as eternal and the image is of the couple “drawing nigh & nigher” to Heaven

together, "Face to Face, silent". There is power and connection in the image. The figures are "erect and strong" and there seems to be no need for words. This projects a sense of sublime understanding between the two. They are represented as a mirror image which reflects the idea that they are eternally linked together through the depth and purity of their love. It is a religious era and Barrett Browning was strong in her faith so the image of them moving to Heaven in an angel image with wings of fire is not surprising.

What is surprising is her rejection of attaining eternal life. In a very clever but also very provocative image she speaks of the angels as interfering with their perfection. She questions whether they will be happier in Heaven or on Earth. She asks what can Earth do to upset the power of their love:

what bitter wrong,



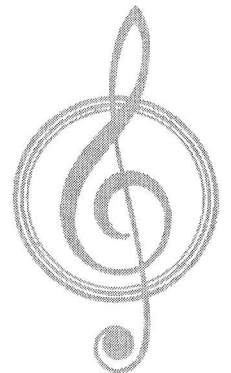
*Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented?*

She then implores him to consider the demands of the angels and Heaven that would impose upon their relationship. She uses the image of a sphere of idyllic song that would disturb their serenity:

*Think, . . . in mounting higher,
The angels would press on us, and aspire
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence*

This is a delightful inversion of expected reactions to perfection. Here she describes the song as a solid metal shape, the "golden orb", which gives it bulky heaviness so we understand the "perfect song" will be too intrusive. It will be too noisy and invasive.

So the persona implores the lover to stay on earth. She uses the term of endearment "beloved" to add weight to her argument. Earth's faults are turned to the couple's advantage. Since mortal men have "unfit contrarious moods" they turn away from the "pure spirits" of the lovers. Men because of their imperfection leave them unbothered. the lovers have "A place to stand and love in". This standing image is a return to the opening of the sonnet and we are reminded of the strength and power of the love that binds the couple. Indeed it seems they are in their own space as "darkness and the death-hour" seem to go round them, circling them but not disturbing.



Ideas

The power of love

Barrett Browning inverts the expected attitude towards Heaven and ascension to emphasise the intimate connection and spiritual closeness of her and Browning. Their love is precious and seems beyond the understanding of other mortals. By focusing on their "deep, dear silence" she emphasises that the love is beyond ordinary forms of communication.

The nature of ideal love / Love and mortality

This poem reveals Barrett Browning's notion of real love and, in so doing, explores her notion of ideal love. The use of the image of loving in death, together as their souls ascend to Heaven, shows Barrett Browning's desire for love to be eternal. She does not present real, spiritual love as transitory or ephemeral. Instead, by utilising the image of eternal life she suggests the love she shares for her lover lasts beyond mortality.

The notion that she prefers her lover's company to Heaven she is emphasises their connection. In such a Christian era this was a very effective image as it places love as sublime. This is a concept of ideal love and it is clearly not one that the rest of mortality readily understands. The notion of the lovers being turned from as "the unfit / Contrarious moods of men recoil away" suggests this incomprehension, even fear. There is a hint of arrogance as the love seems to give the speaker a sense of power and supremacy so she can judge humankind as "unfit". This also reveals the opposition she felt to their love. Remember her father refused such relationships so the love was forced to be in secret. There is

a clear sense that the lovers have something that others do not understand, despite its wonder.

It is also interesting that the love described seems to exist in relative quietness, described as "deep, dear silence". The speaker fears the song of the angels will intrude on this. This probably reflects the secrecy and distance involved in the relationship but it also reflects the complexity of their connection. Barrett Browning presents the love as ideal as there is a spiritual link that goes beyond superficial speech. We have seen this idea in Sonnet XIV and Sonnet XXI.

Sonnet XXII - Questions

1. Summarise this poem in FIVE points.
2. In your own words, explain why the image of the lovers standing, soul to soul, is so effective in representing the power of their love.
3. In your own words, explain how Barrett Browning makes the rejection of ascending to Heaven and effective way to represent the importance of his words of love.
4. a. Examine the structure of the sonnet. Summarise its features (ie. rhyme scheme, line stresses, line syllables, idea development)

b. How tightly is it organised?
5. Explain how Barrett Browning has used dashes to help represent her ideas.
6. What is the effect of referring negatively to heavenly imagery?
7. Rewrite the poem in prose, using colloquial language. Try and capture the poet's ideas about the supremacy of their love.